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ABSTRACT

This article describes a teacher education program, "Studies in Educational Alternatives" (S.E.A.), at Mankato State University (Minnesota). The program is committed to personalization and practicum experiences as major components of teacher preparation. The document discusses: (1) program design; (2) admission processes; (3) self-directed study; (4) field experiences and seminars in pedagogy; (5) supervision; and (6) program effectiveness. Conclusions to be drawn are that a combination of selected admittance criteria and careful attention to the climate in which instruction and field experiences are conducted is a powerful key to the successful preparation of qualified teachers. Students provided with quality field experiences, supportive and informed supervision, and some control over programs emerge as competent teachers. The results of this study suggest that it is possible to construct a personalized field-based program while maintaining the high academic and teaching performance standards demanded by both the university and public concern. (LL)

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Attention to Climate: A Case Study of Two Decades of Personalized and Field-Based Teacher Preparation

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Attention to Climate:

Personalized and Field-based Teacher Preparation

Amidst the spate of reviews and reports dealing with teacher education during the last decade, there have been a great many proposals for change. In large measure, these have been prescriptive in character, focused on the constants of liberal or general education, teacher education admittance standards and procedures, subject matter, the study of pedagogy (Lanier and Little 1986) and the relative merits of four- and five-year programs. The range of thinking about teacher education has broadened, and there is increased desire to establish a profile of teacher education (e.g., Yarger 1989; Galuzzo and Arends 1989) and an appropriate knowledge base for teacher preparation, such as proposed by Reynolds (1989), Shulman (1986), Valli and Tom (1988) and others. This article is a summation with observations about one self-described exemplary teacher education program, Studies in Educational Alternatives (S.E.A.), at Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota.

For the past twenty years the Studies in Educational Alternatives (S.E.A.) program at Mankato State University in Minnesota has been committed to personalization and to practicum experiences as major components of its teacher preparation. The smallness—about 90 students—and non-proprietary character of S.E.A. has made the program quickly adaptable to its mandate of promoting change.

The S.E.A. Program Design

The design of S.E.A. was strongly influenced by the climate of the early 1970s, when alternative education and humanistic principles were affecting education at all levels. With clinical experiences as the major approach to all methods areas, and self-directed, personalized and individualized strategies, and with a strong advising system, S.E.A.

embodied alternative education applied to teacher preparation. Although later modified according to the shifting educational climates the early goals of the program also fit the environment of the times: S.E.A. hoped to prepare some teachers to function in alternative education settings.

But the alternative movement within public education was not able to sustain itself much beyond the late 1970s, although many of its practices and principles found their way into the mainstream system in one manner or another. It was clear that laissez-faire approaches, with their lack of rigor and boundaries, were waning by the end of the 70s, and S.E.A. responded by more sharply defining the tasks expected of its students and the processes of the program. It limited its preparation efforts to the elementary level, developed materials for self-directed but program-guided learning experiences in the content areas, and initiated a competency approach to the methods areas (social studies, science, mathematics, art, music, physical education and reading/language arts). A defined admissions process was instituted, and seminars were developed, coordinated with the methods areas in which students would do their practica.

Admission Processes

Institutions of higher learning began using a variety of defensible admissions methods such as earned credits, formal application, interviews, and language tests. Yet there is a lack of consistency throughout teacher education programs concerning these procedures. And debate continues as to whether or not selective academic admissions standards produce competent and committed teachers (Freeman, Martin, Brousseau, and West 1989). It was in this milieu that S.E.A. began to give careful consideration developing its academic and personal admissions standards.

As a result, S.E.A. instituted a personal interview, a grade point guideline (not used as a solitary criterion to exclude students), and an enrollment ceiling. Students are admitted to S.E.A. via a two-phased process. In the first—interview—phase, the student and a staff member explore mutual goals, needs and desires, and review the program's field-based and other practices. Pains are taken to conduct the interviews in a friendly, non-judgmental way, showing concern and support for the student. An attempt is made to gauge the level of motivation, academic standing, life circumstances, and readiness to become a contributing part of a program which demands high levels of initiative, responsibility, and time- and schedule-management. Following the interview the student may submit an application which asks for documentation of prior instances of 1. initiative; 2. responsibility; and 3. effective time- and schedule-management; the student also attaches a statement of what s/he believes an effective and professional educator should be like. A letter of reference from someone qualified to estimate teaching potential must be attached to the responses. Acceptance is by unanimous consent of all three staff members.

This process is meant not only to sort out unlikely applicants, but to communicate to all applicants the seriousness with which the program views a commitment to teaching. Uncommitted or faltering candidates seem to choose not to undergo the interview process, and so they self-select away from the program.

Self-directed Study

Once admitted, there is a continuous attempt to support students in all aspects of their preparation. The first quarter in S.E.A. is spent in program-directed but student-guided "independent" study courses and in conventional professional education classes, not in field experiences. Also, these novices must attend a special seminar which orients them to

the program's novel processes. The initial quarter becomes in effect a conditional period for further observation of student skills, attitudes and motivations.

Field Experiences and Seminars in Pedagogy

In most teacher preparation programs, field experiences have become an integral element, with both pre-service students and cooperating teachers realizing benefits (Elliott and Mays 1979). These clinical practica have become the hallmark of the S.E.A. program.

While there is as yet little research showing that field experiences do produce better teachers, the studies we have done of S.E.A. graduates confirms intuitive and practice-based conclusions supporting these experiences as a basic ingredient in teacher education. In S.E.A., practica take on the form of apprenticeships in up to seven methods areas and last for about nine weeks. The S.E.A. student is expected to be in the classroom each time the particular content area meets. Each methods practicum thus usually entails from 36-45 hours of direct classroom experience, often with more than half of these hours being dedicated to instructional activities. The staff provide current methods texts to be used as resources, work hand-in-glove with the cooperating teacher, and carry out supervision tasks using criteria available to the student.

Practica, however, do not stand only on their own considerable merits. They are no guarantee of success in and of themselves, and they necessitate other kinds of support, such as direct instruction, discussion, and research into pedagogy. Cruikshank and Armaline (1986) believe that early field experiences complemented by regular pedagogy courses result in greater commitment to the profession and to and refinement of teaching skills.

In S.E.A. the emphasis on field practica is supplemented by weekly seminars for those students working in each of the methods areas. A seminar dealing with current educational

trends and issues is also required. These seminars are meant not to provide breadth of coverage in the content of each area, since there is little indication about what is the essential content knowledge of the disciplines (Lanier and Little 1986). Rather they are intended to provide in-depth treatment of a few critical areas for the purpose of modeling the process of instructional strategy development. That is, the seminars seek to promote understanding of <u>how</u> good teaching is applied in typical content areas and to provide students with skills in developing instructional techniques, an approach supported by Porter (1988). The seminars also attempt to convey the relative importance of some topical areas over others, as Porter also suggests. Furthermore, the regular meetings in a relatively intimate seminar style satisfy some peer socialization needs (cf. Goodlad 1990), though they are not strictly cohort groups.

Supervision

It is the conviction of the staff that informed supervision contributes significantly to the quality of the students' internship experiences. Because the staff demonstrate interest in promoting success, students experience supervision as relatively non-threatening. The values of the program demand that supervision be supportive and formative; that is, that supervision contribute psychologically as well as pedagogically to the creation of a successful experience for the student and for the cooperating teacher. While there may be some student anxiety attaching to a visit to a classroom where the student is performing, the general reaction is to welcome the supervisor. The conclusion is not solely that good supervision is required in promoting good teaching, but that personalization of supervision—supervision done where student and supervisor are well-acquainted and trusting of one another—is an overlooked factor in the practicum equation. Models of supervision such as Hunter's (1984) or Glickman's (1990) can be useful tools, and

supervision need not be the idiosyncratic practice it often has been in the past. Yet the climate in which it occurs—a trusting student-supervisor relationship—is consequential to the outcome. In this aspect it closely resembles peer coaching (Raney and Robbins 1991).

Practica, however, do not stand only on their own considerable merits. They are no guarantee of success in and of themselves, and they necessitate other kinds of support, such as direct instruction, discussion, and research into pedagogy. Cruikshank and Armaline (1986) believe that early field experiences complemented by regular pedagogy courses result in greater commitment to the profession, learning classroom routines, familiarity and skill with management strategies, learning to work with various socioeconomic groups and refinement of teaching skills.

In S.E.A. the emphasis on field practica is supplemented by weekly seminars for those students working in each methods area. These are primarily taught by practicing elementary teachers. A seminar dealing with current trends and issues in education is also required. These seminars are meant not to provide breadth of coverage in the pedagogy of each area since there is little agreement in teacher education about essential content knowledge. Rather they are intended to provide in-depth treatment of a few critical areas for the purpose of modeling the process of instructional strategy development. The seminars seek to promote understanding of <u>how</u> good teaching is applied in typical content areas and to provide students with skills in developing instructional techniques, an approach supported by Porter (1988). The seminars also attempt to convey the relative importance of some topical areas over others, as Porter suggests. Furthermore, the regular meetings in a relatively intimate seminar style satisfy some peer socialization needs (cf. Goodlad 1990), though these are not strictly cohort groups.

The Effectiveness of the Program

In our studies of graduates, many of whom remain practicing teachers, we have discovered an assuring pattern of unusually high satisfaction that confirms our own convictions that our approach to teacher education is effective. Our contact with cooperating teachers too has led us to the same conclusion. There are other measures as well. For instance, S.E.A. graduates appear to secure teaching positions at rates exceeding Minnesota and national averages, with nearly two our of three S. E. A. respondents saying they found teaching jobs within one year of graduation. This is particularly notable because so many of them were non-traditional students for whom relocation was virtually impossible.

Retention rate too is regarded as a sign that committed and suitably talented students are being admitted to any program. About 97 out of each 100 students complete the program, a rate suggesting the effectiveness of both admittance and the subsequent processes. While there is currently much advice to apply sterner criteria to students in teacher preparation programs, it is our experience that establishing careful admittance procedures, establishing trust, promoting practica and giving considerable psychological support to students at personal levels, and affording them some control over their programs, is a surer—or at least an alternative—formula for success.

Candidates for S.E.A. do not conform to the usual profile of students in many respects. S.E.A. students have been, on average, seven or more years older than traditional students (Olszewski, 1985). Applicants who have life experience beyond that of the student who has entered higher education out of secondary school provide welcome diversity to learning.

The evidence we have gathered convincingly shows, according to the criteria we have adopted (principally these: principally these: student satisfaction, retention, employment

rate) that the program has done a creditable job of preparing teachers. Graduates consistently claim to have gathered confidence and independence, experience, flexibility and creativity through the experiential and personalized processes. "I was encouraged to be my own person, to be self-guided, and [to] continue to learn" says a graduate. Another puts it this way: "By the time my senior year rolled around, I was eager and ready and competent". Yet another remarks, "The in-classroom practice was instrumental in providing me with confidence, poise, and discipline...prior to student teaching". It stands to reason that a healthy degree of self-confidence significantly affects the teaching performance.

Conclusion

The most far-reaching of the conclusions to be drawn is that a combination of selected admittance criteria and careful attention to the climate in which instruction and field experiences are conducted is a powerful key to the successful preparation of qualified teachers. Where students have some control over their program, where they are provided quality field experiences, where supportive and informed supervision is provided, and where there is evident and consistent concern and helpfulness from the staff, there is every likelihood of preparing successful and competent teachers. A program such as S.E.A. is labor-intensive. But the results of our study and reflection provide ample evidence that it is possible to construct a personalized field-based program while maintaining the high academic and teaching performance standards justly demanded by the university and by public concern.

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